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ABSTRACT

This booklet is for people who are involved in community affairs, either as direct participants, group facilitators, or agency sponsors. The booklet discusses the reasons for considering a community survey and provides tips on how to prepare for a survey. Groups that have decided to write and conduct their own survey have the following major activities to complete: selecting a survey method, deciding what questions to ask and how the data will be used, deciding whom to survey, publicizing the survey, conducting the survey, tabulating and displaying survey information, and reporting survey results. Each of these key activities is discussed in detail. Several sample worksheets are included at the end of the booklet. (Author/MLF)

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Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

COMMUNITY SURVEYS: GRASSROOTS APPROACHES

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and
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ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services--training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is for people who are involved in community affairs, either as direct participants or group facilitators or agency sponsors. Such people often confront the need to ascertain what community opinion is in relation to issues such as consolidating a rural school district, converting a wilderness area to a recreation area, centralizing law enforcement records or locating a new hospital facility. The booklet discusses the reasons for considering a community survey, provides tips on how to prepare for a survey and discusses each of the key activities in a survey. Several sample worksheets are included at the end of the booklet for your use. Feel free to adapt them to fit the needs of your group.

WHY SURVEY YOUR COMMUNITY?

Citizens' groups often form because of a concern. They are typically interested in action, rather than study. It is not surprising that they ask, "Why should we conduct a survey?"

There are several good reasons to conduct a survey of community opinion before engaging in more active efforts to bring about change. Some of these are that:

- Efforts which are based upon a known base of support are more likely to succeed than those that are not.
- Decision makers are more likely to be favorable to proposals that are backed up by community opinion data.

- The group can use the survey to test its own ideas in a larger community forum before deciding upon a course of action.

- The larger community can be informed of the work of the group and can participate in it through a survey.

- Community survey information can help a group represent the larger community, rather than just the group's own interests.

Whether these are the reasons your group is considering a survey or not, a thorough discussion and agreement about purposes make a strong foundation for planning and conducting a survey. The Sample Worksheet 1 in the back of this booklet is a place to record your group's purposes for surveying community opinion.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A SURVEY

Once you have decided to conduct a community survey, your citizens' group faces several more important questions: Who should conduct the survey? Who should be informed of the survey in advance and how? What are the major activities that must be completed? What resources will be needed--volunteer time, use of facilities, materials, cash--and how can they be obtained? When is the best time for the survey, and how soon must it be completed? In short, the first step in a survey is planning.*

Your group's answers to the six questions posed and discussed in the following paragraphs will provide a sound framework for the survey activities discussed later on.

* A more comprehensive discussion of planning is contained in the booklet, "Planning for Change: Three Critical Elements."

WHO SHOULD BE INFORMED AND INVOLVED?

Early in the planning effort, individuals and groups whose cooperation or endorsement will be needed for a successful survey should be identified and contacted by your citizens' group. Examples of those who like to be aware of community-wide activities pertinent to their own interests include:

- Policy boards in your area of interest, such as the city council, school board or county commission
- Other stakeholder or advocacy groups concerned with problems similar to those your group is investigating
- Staff members of public agencies charged with responsibility for the problems your group is addressing
- Agencies who control resources that may eventually focus on your group's concerns
- Recognized leaders of groups such as landowners, mothers, businessmen or migrants who have spoken out on issues your group is confronting

Their knowledge of your plans will avoid later surprises and may yield resources you might otherwise miss.

WHO SHOULD WRITE AND CONDUCT THE SURVEY?

Three alternatives present themselves in answer to this question, with many other possible variations:

1. Your group can formulate and conduct the survey.

2. Your group can select a standard copyrighted survey and conduct it themselves.

3. You can hire or solicit volunteer experts who will formulate and conduct the survey.

All three alternatives have advantages and disadvantages, as the chart below displays. Generally speaking, the advantages are strongest for Alternative 1 and the disadvantages most pronounced for Alternative 3, but your group should thoroughly discuss the probable consequences of each option before deciding.

Advantages and Disadvantages of
Various Persons Formulating and Conducting
a Community Survey

Alternatives	Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Your group	Complete understanding of survey instrument and technique High ownership by group Acquisition of group skills	Less sophisticated and perhaps less reliable survey results More group time needed
2. Your group with published instrument	Less writing effort	More effort in searching for instrument May not yield pertinent results May be costly
3. Outside experts	No worry on writing or conducting	May be costly May not be credible to community

WHAT ARE THE KEY ACTIVITIES IN A COMMUNITY SURVEY?

For groups that have decided to write and conduct their own survey, there are seven major activities to complete: selecting a survey method, deciding what questions to ask and how you will use the data, deciding whom to survey, publicizing the survey, conducting the survey, tabulating and displaying survey information, and reporting survey results. Each of these key activities is discussed in detail in this booklet, beginning on page 7.

WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTIVITIES?

As soon as possible, identify people in your group who will be responsible for completing each of the major tasks outlined above. Some assignments may go to individuals, others to teams or committees, still others to the group at large. If your group is small, other supporters in the community may be asked to assist with certain tasks. If consultants will be needed, list them along with group members and have someone accept the responsibility for contacting them.*

Finally, someone from the group should assume responsibility for coordinating and monitoring the entire survey. If your chairperson or convener cannot accept this role, select another member with some management skills who will keep track of progress, answer questions, find resources, and so on.

* "Using Consultants: Getting What You Want," another booklet in this series, offers some guidelines for recruiting, hiring and working with consultants.

WHAT'S THE TIMELINE?

The two mistakes groups most often make in setting deadlines are not allowing enough time and not allowing for special community time patterns. When scheduling your survey activities, remember that most of you are probably volunteers with other responsibilities. Set reasonable deadlines and intermediate points for progress checks, so that the timeline can be altered if necessary.

Special community time patterns that your schedule will need to accommodate might include a harvest time in rural areas, vacation time in urban areas, legislative sessions in state capitals, ceremonial times in Native American communities, and so forth. Take into account what you and the people you want opinions from would normally be doing on the dates you have set for your survey, and you will increase the response to your survey greatly.

WHERE ARE THE RESOURCES?

With the tasks and timeline laid out, identifying the resources you will need for the survey is not difficult. Locating the resources, on the other hand, requires ingenuity. Unless you have a substantial budget, try to arrange the free use of needed resources and save your money for unavoidable expenses such as postage, long distance phone calls or gasoline.

Resources can be divided easily into five categories: person power, equipment, facilities, materials and consumables. Consider each category as you assess your current and needed resources. To start, list the resources you will need for each task, then check off those you already have. Next, list possible sources for the remaining needs. Finally, after

exhausting other possibilities, cost out what you will have to pay for and see where you stand financially. Sample Worksheet 2, located at the back of this booklet, can be used to examine resources.

By considering and responding to each of these planning questions, your group will be well prepared to conduct its survey. Next, the seven activities that are key in a survey are discussed in depth.

KEY ACTIVITIES IN A COMMUNITY SURVEY

SELECTING A SURVEY METHOD

The first important survey activity is choosing an overall method for the survey. The basic question the group is addressing at this point is, "What is the best way to gather opinions from members of our community?"

There are three basic methods for conducting a survey. These are:

- Questionnaires--printed questions which people can write their responses to.
- Interviews--person-to-person or phone questions which people can respond to individually and verbally; the interviewer records the responses.
- Town or neighborhood speakup meetings--people are asked to respond to questions in the setting of a public meeting; responses can be recorded in several ways.

Of course, a combination of these methods can be considered. For example, first hold a speakup meeting, then follow this with questionnaires or interviews.

Yours may be a community in which important special factors should be considered before undertaking a survey. Some of these would be:

- Literacy--Can everyone read? If not, a mail-out questionnaire will not produce desired results.

- Culture and Language Differences--Are there various culture and language groups in your community? If so, conducting the survey through translators or printing the questionnaire in a multi-lingual format may be necessary.

- Distance and Geographic Isolation--Do you live in a community where people live great distances from one another? Where mail service is irregular? Where telephone service is poor? Those are important factors in deciding how to conduct a survey.

Once a method or combination of methods has been chosen, the group then has several choices about how best to carry out the survey. If your group has decided to use a *questionnaire* method, for example, it might consider some of these ideas for employing it:

- mail out and ask for responses to be returned by mail (prepaid postage will yield a higher response)

- distribute at meetings of community groups

- distribute and pick up door to door

- publish in local newsletter or newspaper and request mail back

The two questions which are important in using the questionnaire method are, "What is the best way to distribute the questionnaire?" and, "What is the best way to get completed questionnaires back again?"

If an *interview* method has been chosen by the group, it might consider some of these ideas about carrying it out.

- door to door interviews
- telephone interviews
- at meetings of community groups
- at social events

Interviewing requires some skill. Your group should consider a short training session for interviewers before they begin conducting interviews. For example, all interviewers ought to be able to explain the purpose of the interview in a similar fashion and to provide assurance of confidentiality of those interviewed. It is also important that all interviewers record responses to interview questions in an accurate and comparable manner. The Sample Worksheet #1 at the back of this booklet provides space to record your group's agreements about how it is going to carry out the survey.

DECIDING WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK

Probably the most critical choice your group has to make is developing the questions which it wants to ask of the community. There are several approaches to this task.

1. The group can develop questions based upon its own perceptions of goals or improvement needs.

2. The group can develop questions by working with recent studies or survey results which reveal issues or needs for improvement.

3. The group can develop questions by studying examples of questions asked in community surveys from other places.

4. The group can develop questions by sponsoring meetings of other community groups, asking them to generate goals or improvement needs.

5. The group can study public opinion as expressed in newspaper editorials, letters, articles and radio or television commentary.

6. The group can ask for questions from opinion leaders in the community.

Whichever approach is chosen by your group, it should test each question against the yardstick of utility. It should ask: "Is the information we get by asking this question really going to be useful to us? If so, in what way?"

Testing each question in this way will be of great help to the group in keeping the survey process as simple and straightforward as possible. Keep in mind that the group will later face the problem of tabulating the information gathered in the survey and of using the information to plan and implement improvements in the community.

A Sample Survey Questionnaire is included at the end of the booklet for your group to consider as it develops its own questions for the survey.

Types of Questions

Two basic types of questions can be employed in a survey of community opinion.

- questions which require the respondent to answer in specific ways

- questions which allow the respondent to answer in an open fashion

Examples of the first or "fixed-response" type of question are the following:

- questions which can be answered by yes, no, or I don't know
- questions which can be answered by marking a scale from high to low, strong to weak, 10% to 100%, etc.
- questions which provide a number of responses to be arranged in an order of degree of importance, support, felt need, etc.

Questions of the second or "open-ended" type ask respondents to give their opinion on the topic, in their own words.

There are advantages and disadvantages of both kinds of questions. In general, fixed-response questions, while easier to tabulate, may miss some of the important issues because they are stated too narrowly. Open-ended questions, while more likely to reflect the range of community opinion, are more difficult to tabulate.

Many surveys combine the strengths of both kinds of questions by asking for some fixed responses and some open-ended responses, so that no important information is overlooked. To illustrate how these two types of questions differ, the following example is provided.

Let's say that a community group is interested in gathering public opinion about the adequacy of roads in the area, among other things. Questions about this issue might be phrased in the following ways:

Example 1 (fixed response)	How important is it that our community roads be improved? ____ very important ____ moderately important ____ moderately unimportant ____ very unimportant
Example 2 (fixed response and open ended)	In your opinion, are the roads in our community adequate? ____ yes ____ no ____ don't know Please comment:
Example 3 (open ended)	In your opinion, what specific improvements could be made in our community's roads?

Testing the Survey Questions

Once questions for the survey have been developed, it is a good idea to test them in a trial run. Members of your group can question members of their families, friends, acquaintances. Testing the questions serves several purposes:

- The clarity of the questions can be assessed. Are they understandable?
- The kind and level of information which the questions elicit can be assessed. Is it the information desired?

Based upon the results of the test, the questions can be revised before the full survey is undertaken.

DECIDING WHOM TO SURVEY

Community groups in smaller communities often begin with the desire to include everyone in the survey effort. Although this is a worthy goal, it is generally very difficult to achieve without considerable time and effort. A realistic discussion of who is to be surveyed is in order. To be truly representative of community opinion, members of all of the parts or groupings within the community ought to be surveyed. The group might begin by listing all of the elements of the community at large and estimating the size of these constituent parts. Such a list might look like this:

Community Profile

Age Groups		**Financial Information**	
Adults	40%	Average family income	$7,200
Senior citizens	10%	Avg. no. of wage earners per household	1.75
Employed	75%		
Unemployed	15%	Family income range	$2,200 - $185,000
Youth	60%		
School aged	70%	**Occupations**	
high school		Loggers	10%
elementary school		Mill workers	20%
Pre-school aged	30%	Professionals	5%
Racial Information		Housewives	40%
White	80%	Other	25%
Minority	20%		

Information of this kind is usually available at a local library or city and county government offices. It can usually be found in the city and county data books, census of population reports and city directories.

The characteristics of people within the community are important to consider for your sample or coverage in the survey. Collecting this information as part of the survey will allow your group to keep track of strengths and weaknesses of the information collected. It will allow the group to determine how representative the opinions gathered are of the total community. Finally, even if the group does not survey everyone in the community, gathering responses from some in each group will ensure that the survey results are more reliable than if some groups' opinions are left out.

PUBLICIZING THE SURVEY

Publicity about the survey is important for several reasons. It paves the way for interviewers, meetings or a mail survey. It generates interest in the issue your group is interested in, as well as in the results of the survey itself. And it leads to a better response rate from those surveyed and therefore to more representative data. One note of caution is in order: to avoid polarizing public opinion or biasing results of the survey, stick to publicizing survey purposes, method, timeline and so on; don't announce specific questions the survey will contain.

Means of publicizing the survey include using the media, posting and handing out notices and telephone calls. If the local press is alerted to a community-wide event, free newspaper space is almost always available. Public service time on radio and television is also free but generally requires someone to write short (15-30-60 second) announcements. Local talk shows or news shows might interview someone from

your group. Posters can be placed in local markets, post offices, libraries and other public places. Flyers might be sent or delivered to local townspeople.

A good rule of thumb is to use as many kinds of publicity as you have time and resources for, concentrating on those that will most likely reach the people you want to be aware of the survey.

CONDUCTING THE SURVEY

Conducting the survey is theoretically easy, if adequate planning and practice have taken place. In reality, it can be frustrating and slow work, with many call-backs or mail responses dragging in, not to mention barking dogs or crotchety day-sleepers. Being aware of possible obstacles in advance can help keep your surveyors' morale up. Providing a contact person to hear daily reports and plan strategy with the survey team can also lift morale at the end of a long day.

TABULATING AND DISPLAYING SURVEY INFORMATION

Tabulating survey data by hand can be a drab and distasteful task. It is well to think about some ways to make the tabulating sessions as enjoyable as possible. Some suggestions are:

- Work in pairs or small groups.
- Provide ample refreshments for workers.
- Provide opportunities for people to change tasks during the session to relieve tedium.
- Congratulate and thank those who work on tabulating tasks.

Organizing for the Tabulation Task

Many groups have found the "production line" to be an efficient way of organizing the tabulation tasks. Individuals or pairs are assigned the responsibility of tabulating responses to one of the questions on the survey. The response for that question is recorded, and the questionnaire is passed to the next person or pair. Someone should be responsible for work flow, to see that additional help is provided where needed, that individuals get breaks from time to time, and that needed materials are provided for.

Procedures for Tabulating Survey Information

For *fixed-response* kinds of questions, a tabulation form similar to that for answering the question can quickly be devised.

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Question X	𝍸	//	/

Responses to questions can easily be recorded on the form.

For *open-ended* type questions, a tabulation form needs to be devised. One approach to devising the form is to read the responses to the question on the first ten or twenty survey forms. What kinds of responses are found? The kinds of responses can make up the categories in the tabulation form. For example, responses to the question, "In your opinion, what are some improvements needed in our community?" might be:

- a fire engine
- dental services
- a library
- better communication--a newspaper
- more jobs

Within these responses, several types of categories are suggested: a fire engine and a library are equipment and facilities; dental services and a newspaper are services; more jobs belongs to an economic category. Thus, the tabulation cells so far are:

Facilities/equipment	Services	Economic
III	THL	I

Next, read another 10 or 15 survey forms to see if there are other kinds of responses. Generally, a residual or "other" category is needed for some ideas that do not fall into the major ones.

For open-ended questions, it is also suggested that the responses be listed for future reference. There may be many specific ideas that your group will want to explore at a later date.

Writing summary statements which describe responses to questions is another helpful procedure. While they do not attempt to interpret the meaning of the information, summary statements provide the reader or listener with an easily understood picture of the information. A summary statement looks like the following:

"For question 5, 75 people (or 75%) answered favorably, while 20 people (or 20%) answered unfavorably. Five people (or 5%) did not answer this question."

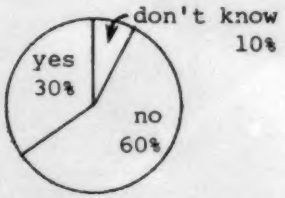
Once the survey information has been tabulated and tallied, a display of the information will be helpful in the reporting and analyzing tasks.

Some simple calculations of percentages will be of great assistance in displaying the information. Percentages are calculated by dividing the number of responses of each type by the total number of responses for that question. Thus, if 100 people responded to a question, and of these 30 people responded "yes," 60 people responded "no" and 10 people responded "don't know," the percentage responses for the question are:

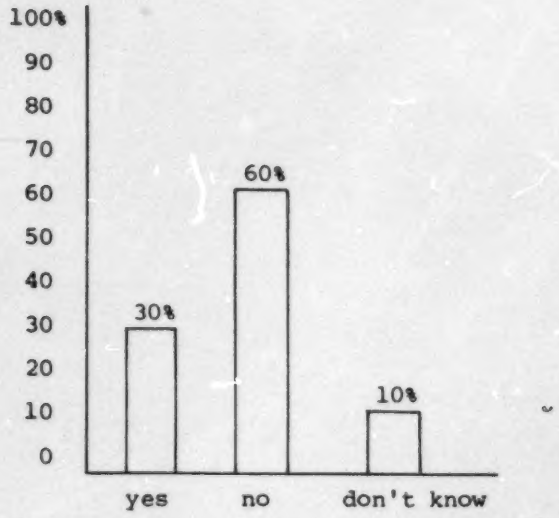
	yes	no	don't know	totals
numbers	30	60	10	100
percentages	$\frac{30}{100} = 30\%$	$\frac{60}{100} = 60\%$	$\frac{10}{100} = 10\%$	100%

With the percentages calculated, it is then easy to display the survey information. In addition to the chart in the example above, pie charts and bar graphs are easy ways to display survey data in a way that allows the reader to quickly grasp the information.

A sample pie chart, using the data from the example above follows:



A sample bar graph displaying the same data follows:



The payoff for the time and effort required to display survey information in chart or graph form is in the greater ease of sharing it simply and effectively with those who want to know.

REPORTING SURVEY RESULTS

Your group should consider carefully to whom and in what form to report the survey information. Some of those who might be considered for reporting purposes are:

- Decision makers: Administrators and boards of agencies who might become involved with your group

- Other citizen groups
- The community at large

For presentations of the report to decision makers, boards and other groups, a combination of a verbal and written report might be considered.

In such reports, the following outline is suggested for your consideration:

1. A review of the methods utilized in conducting the survey
2. A review of how the questions were formulated
3. A review of:
   a. the coverage
   b. representativeness of the response
   c. data results--percentages, graphs, categories of response, summary statements
4. A review of initial impressions of trends in the information: high response areas, apparent priorities
5. A question and answer period

In considering the reporting of survey information, your group should also consider carefully the protection of confidentiality of those who have given information. Certainly, names of information givers should not be included in the report, but also the identity of small groups or individuals should not be revealed in other ways. For example, if there are only two teachers in your community, to report that "teachers responded in this way" is to make these individuals' opinions known publicly.

In reporting to the community at large, the local newspaper, radio, or television station might be considered. Here, summary statements which describe the information collected in the survey might be sufficient for reporting purposes.

SAMPLE WORKSHEET 1

Purposes and Agreements

Purposes our group has identified for the survey:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Agreements our group has made about how to conduct the survey:

1.

2.

3.

4.

SAMPLE WORKSHEET 2

Examining Resources

Task Publicity

Needed Resources	Have (Who, When)	Don't Have (Possible Sources)	Cost of Buying
Committee time	Jane, Asher, Pete, evenings and noontimes		
Equipment			
Typewriter	Jane's office, evenings		
Mimeo			
Xerox			$.04/ copy
Consumables			
Paper for flyers		Joe S. owns print shop, look for throwaways	$.085/ flyer
Postage			
Facilities for meeting		Grange Hall, Todd J.	
Refreshments			
Cookies		Committee members make?	
Coffee			$3.69

SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE*

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE EDUCATION
IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

This is a 1976 survey of selected school districts in Rushmore County to find out how community residents, parents, teachers, students, and school officials feel about their schools.

Please answer all of the questions. If you wish to comment on any questions or qualify your answers, please use the margins or a separate sheet of paper. After completing the questionnaire, please return it in the enclosed envelope. Thank you.

Conducted by Advisory Group on Education, Rushmore County, Colorado

Q-1 We would like to begin by asking how you feel about the education young people receive in your schools. Do you consider it: (Circle the one number of your choice.)

1 EXCELLENT
2 GOOD
3 AVERAGE
4 FAIR
5 POOR

Q-2 Compared to the education received throughout Colorado, do you feel that provided in your community is: (Circle the one number of your choice.)

1 DEFINITELY BETTER
2 PROBABLY BETTER
3 ABOUT THE SAME
4 PROBABLY WORSE
5 DEFINITELY WORSE

(If BETTER or WORSE) For what reasons do you feel that way?

* Adapted from a questionnaire prepared by Nick Smith and Dorothy Erpelding, Rural Education Program, Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory.

Q-3 Here is a list of concerns mentioned to us as school problems being faced by some communities in Rushmore County. We would like to know the extent to which you think each of these is a problem in your community. Please indicate whether you consider each: to NOT be a problem, to be a SLIGHT problem, to be a MODERATE problem, or to be a SERIOUS problem.

Item	To what extent is each item a problem? (Circle your answer.)			
1 Inadequate school buildings .	NOT	SLIGHT	MODERATE	SERIOUS
2 Inadequate athletic facilities.	NOT	SLIGHT	MODERATE	SERIOUS
3 Lack of special programs (e.g., music, foreign language, vocational) . . .	NOT	SLIGHT	MODERATE	SERIOUS
4 Lack of community support for schools	NOT	SLIGHT	MODERATE	SERIOUS
5 Lack of well trained teachers	NOT	SLIGHT	MODERATE	SERIOUS
Can you think of any others?				
6 _____	NOT	SLIGHT	MODERATE	SERIOUS
7 _____	NOT	SLIGHT	MODERATE	SERIOUS

Finally, would you mind telling us a little about yourself to help with the statistical analysis.

Q-4 How long have you lived in your present community? _____ YEARS

Q-5 What is your age? _____ YEARS

Q-6 What is your sex? 1 MALE 2 FEMALE

We do not know whether the things you consider most important about school affairs have been included in this questionnaire. Therefore, if there is anything else you would like to tell us, please use this space.

We greatly appreciate your time and effort in providing us with this information. Thank you for your help.

If the duties of your position call for communicating with the public or others in the field of education, NSPRA membership is a must for you. Current members include superintendents, assistant superintendents, community/public relations specialists, principals, classroom teachers, college professors and students.

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